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The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck, a Romance: Mary Shelley's Elegy for a Lost (K)night

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At the very beginning of her second novel *Valperga* (1823), set in the Italy of the early 14th century, Mary Shelley resumes the traditional imagery which opposes the Middle Ages to the Renaissance by comparing the former to a long night, and the latter to dawn and the birth of light:

The other nations of Europe were yet immersed in barbarism, when Italy, where the light of civilization had never been wholly eclipsed, began to emerge from the darkness of the ruin of the Western Empire, and to catch from the East the returning rays of literature and science.¹

This true child of the Enlightenment, both in the metaphorical and the literal sense, as the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, thereby echoes her husband Percy Shelley, who in *A Defence of Poetry* presents Dante as “the first awakener of entranced Europe [...], the Lucifer of that starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy, as from heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world,”² as the bearer of a light illuminating the obscurity of the medieval times. This “dark night of the Middle Ages”³ is commonly held to have come to an end in England with the accession of the Tudors to the throne in 1485,⁴ after the battle of Bosworth. Long considered by thinkers and writers such as Voltaire, Hobbes, Locke or Goldsmith as an age of intellectual darkness to be dispelled by the

¹ *Valperga: Or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

² D. H. Reiman and S. Powers, eds., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, (New York: Norton, 1977), 499–500.

³ General information about the association of darkness and night with the Middle Ages is provided in Eric. G. Stanley, “The Early Middle Ages = the Dark Ages = the Heroic Age of England and in English”, in Marie-Françoise Alamichel and Derek Brewer, eds., *The Middle Ages after the Middle Ages in the English-Speaking World* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 43–77, which analyses what thinkers have meant by their use of the term “Dark Ages.” This essay also shows that the Middle Ages were looked upon as a period of intellectual darkness by many historians up to the twentieth century.

⁴ See for example *The Oxford History of Britain* (Kenneth O. Morgan, ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], chapter 4: “The Later Middle Ages [1290–1485]”); although historians such as Paul Murray Kendall (*The Yorkist Age: Daily Life during the Wars of the Roses* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1962]) and Jonathan Hughes (*Arthurian Myths and Alchemy; The Kingship of Edward IV* [Stroud: Sutton, 2002]) trace the end of the feudal system and of the medieval period in England back to the reign of Edward IV, father to Mary Shelley's Richard.

“light of reason,”⁵ the medieval era is repeatedly denigrated by them as a time of ignorance, superstition and error, hence the well-known phrase “the long night of the Middle Ages,” in which “night” is given a pejorative meaning.

However, although Mary Shelley casts a harsh judgment on this period in the excerpt from *Valperga* quoted above with the words “ruins” and “barbarism,” she seems to qualify it in her novel *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck, A Romance*⁶ published seven years later and set in the final years of the 15th century. This work will be studied here for the ambivalent way in which it presents the turning-point in history marked by the battle of Bosworth and the victory of Henry VII. The dawning of the Tudor era supposedly puts a welcome end to this night of the Middle Ages, but this is undermined by several points, most notably by the figure of the protagonist, the doomed pretender Richard of York,⁷ also known as Perkin Warbeck, a shining example of all the medieval virtues displayed by a true knight. Richard is a radiant character, handsome and noble, who tries to retrieve the throne of his father. However, if Bosworth Field means the end of the medieval night, Richard’s attempt to restore the House of York to its former glory implies a reactionary will to revive the Wars of the Roses so as to return to the Middle Ages and to a time of slaughter and darkness. Mary Shelley’s obvious admiration for her bright young hero is therefore mitigated by an implicit condemnation of the chivalric code he abides by, leading her to a complex use of imagery through which the medieval night and knights are alternately—or simultaneously—presented as positive and negative.

In spite, or rather because of their alleged obscurity, the Middle Ages offered a fertile terrain for imaginative writers, while a revival of interest in medieval architecture during the 18th century gave rise to a reappraisal of medieval literature, particularly of the “romances” with the publication of, for example, Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) or Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762).⁸ The constraints imposed by the cult of reason on literature and elsewhere began to make room for an “increased reliance upon imagination,”⁹ which found one of its expressions in a taste for the remote, obscure and neglected Middle Ages. The very darkness of the period, the fact that so little was known

⁵ Cited in Stanley, “The Early Middle Ages,” 48.

⁶ London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996. Hereafter referred to as *PW*.

⁷ Mary Shelley chooses to present him as the real son of Edward IV, rightful heir to the British throne, rather than as an impostor.

⁸ On the study of romances in the 18th century, see Arthur Johnston, *Enchanted Ground: The Study of Medieval Romance in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Athlone Press, 1964).

⁹ Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1972), 6.

about it becomes an incentive for writers such as Walpole or Ann Radcliffe, and partly explains the rise and success of the Gothic novel. As Robert Kiely writes, at the time of Hurd or Walpole,

One could see [the Middle Ages] [...] as a time of wider experiential scope than the 18th century because conventional ideas of reality were compounded of the imagined as well as the known, of the half-hidden interior as well as of the exterior life. For those who found value in the Gothic, the “darkness” of the Dark Ages was not, aesthetically speaking, a disadvantage.¹⁰

The medieval period, filled with mystery and superstition, became a stimulus to the literary imagination; it is not surprising that as a true Romantic, Mary Shelley should have chosen this medieval chiaroscuro as the setting of two of her novels. Furthermore, the long 18th century witnessed a continuation of this interest in the Middle Ages through a revival of chivalric notions which developed well into the 19th century: castles were built, armours collected, illustrators and painters turned to the medieval period for inspiration, and of course the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott were immensely popular. Successful books such as Stacey Grimaldi’s *A Suit of Armour for Youth* (1824) or Kenelm Henry Digby’s *The Broad Stone of Honour*, published in 1822¹¹ and subtitled “Rules for the Gentlemen of England,” treated chivalry as a code still alive in the 19th century and encouraged readers to be chivalrous.¹²

In this context, even if the distinctions between the various terms added to book titles, “novel,” “romance,” or “tale,” are somewhat blurred by 1830,¹³ the qualification “A Romance” which follows “The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck” links the book, however remotely, to the medieval romances as well as to Gothic novels¹⁴ and to the best-known romance of Mary Shelley’s age, Walter Scott’s medieval *Ivanhoe* (1819).¹⁵ The dark medieval

¹⁰ Kiely, *Romantic Novel*, 29.

¹¹ An expanded edition in four volumes appeared in 1828–29, which testifies to the influence of the book at the time when Mary Shelley was writing *PW*.

¹² On the revival of chivalry in England in the 18th and 19th centuries, see Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot, Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹³ Johanna M. Smith points out that “[t]wo 1823 reviews of *Valperga* show the slippage between the realistic novel and the romance: while the *Examiner* considered *Valperga* a ‘historical novel’ and *Blackwood’s* termed it a ‘historical-romance’, both reviews compared it to Mary Shelley’s prior ‘romance fiction’, *Frankenstein*.” (*Mary Shelley* [New York: Twayne, 1996], 56.)

¹⁴ See for example the titles of Ann Radcliffe’s novels: *A Sicilian Romance* (1790); *The Romance of the Forest* (1791); *The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance* (1794); *The Italian; or, The Confessional of the Black Penitents: A Romance* (1797); *Gaston de Blondville; or, The Court of Henry III, Keeping Festival in Ardenne: A Romance* (published in 1826).

¹⁵ See Lidia Garbin, “*The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*: Walter Scott in the Writings of Mary Shelley,” *Romanticism on the Net* 6 (May 1997) [online]. Available on <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/warbeck.html>

aspects of the Gothic novel pervade *PW* by means of Gothic characters such as the evil monk and Gothic themes such as revenge, parricide, usurpation, bastardy, imprisonment; a structural device is provided by the Gothic figure (resumed and developed by the Jacobin novel) of the pursued hero, wandering from country to country and from hiding-place to hiding-place. Of greater interest is the setting of *PW*, strongly reminiscent of Radcliffe or Walpole's medieval castles: the Tower of London is indeed the focal point of the book in geographical, symbolic and diegetic terms, as the place where Richard of York begins and ends his career. Built by William the Conqueror on the ruins of a Roman fortress, strengthened and enlarged by Henry III, this Tower is the very emblem of the Middle Ages¹⁶ and possesses an archetypal value underlined by David Punter in his study of William Harrison Ainsworth's *Tower of London* (1840).¹⁷ Mary Shelley had already included a reference to the Tower in *Frankenstein*: the only monuments mentioned by Victor Frankenstein during his Londonian stay are "the numerous steeples of London, St Paul's towering above all, and the Tower famed in English history,"¹⁸ reference enhanced by the verb "tower." From his childhood, which was partly spent imprisoned there as one of the "Princes in the Tower," Richard remembers its "dreary cells, with their narrow deep windows; the court yards, which the sun seldom visits; the massy dark walls," whose "black stones" (*PW* 75) seem to block out the light. Throughout the novel, the Tower is repeatedly presented as a place to be visited by night, the night to which it belongs: Richard enters and roams around it by night towards the middle of the book, while his wife and sister visit him there by night at the very end. *PW* is thus given a nocturnal backdrop against which the doomed fortunes of the chivalrous hero are played.

Thanks to his generosity, courage, nobleness, devotion to his lady and respect for women in general, Richard is the epitome of the medieval knight, champion of the old order, but the world in which he lives and fights is no longer that of his heroic Plantagenêts ancestors evoked through the figures of Edward III and of his namesake Richard Lionheart. Mary Shelley's novel indeed opens on the immediate aftermath of the battle of Bosworth; in other words, it presents a striking example of "rhexis," the breaking trope identified by Margaret Doody,¹⁹ as the Yorkist Age and the Middle Ages give way to the Tudor era and the Renaissance. As "the evening close[s] in" (*PW* 7) in the second paragraph, soon followed by

¹⁶ See Maurice Lévy, *Le Roman « gothique » anglais, 1764–1824* (Toulouse: Faculté des Lettres, 1968), 161.

¹⁷ *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day* (1980; London: Longman, 1996), 1: 157.

¹⁸ *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818, rev. 1831; London: Penguin, 1994), 152.

¹⁹ See *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 310-12.

night, three Yorkist horsemen ride as it were into their sunset. They wear the golden spurs of knights, yet “their cloaks were stained and torn; their armour was disjointed, and parts of it were wanting” (*PW* 8). One of them wears “the bonnet of a common soldier,” another is even “bareheaded,” having lost the usual apparel of a knight. If their disorderly and unknightly appearance is of course a consequence of the slaughter and defeat from which they have escaped, it also connotes the decline of chivalry and chivalric virtues, which will be complete by the end of the book as night literally falls on them at the very start. They begin their flight by a downward movement as they “descend[...] from [an] elevation” (*PW* 8), another symbol of their degradation. The opening of the novel clearly marks the end of an era and therefore heralds Richard’s failure. The victory of the Tudor camp seems to entail the doom of the Middle Ages and of its benighted knighthood. Besides, these three knights, one of whom, Lord Lovel, will briefly be Richard’s protector and is presented as the perfect knight “possessed of knightly courage, untarnished honour, and gentlemanly accomplishment” (*PW* 18-19), do not survive the next few chapters. Lord Lovel’s body is not even found after the battle of Stoke, as if he and his chivalric virtues had disappeared without leaving a trace, as if they could not possibly have lived on after Bosworth.

Richard of York, barely twelve years of age in 1485 and brought up in the spirit of chivalry, is therefore an incongruous relic of the Yorkist Age. By setting her novel in the last years of the 15th century, which witness the end of one era and the beginning of another, Mary Shelley juxtaposes antinomic elements to draw a contrast between two men: Richard and Henry; two systems of political and social values: chivalry and a form of proto-capitalism; and two periods: the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Yet the opposition is never clear-cut. Richard’s triumphant enemy, King Henry VII, is not only cold-hearted, cruel and avaricious, he is also depicted as “wise and crafty” (*PW* 46), possessed of “strong sense and understanding” (*PW* 26), distinguished by his “sagacity” and “caution” (*PW* 135); in short, he is a man of reason. Henry displays a strong interest in the discoveries of Christopher Columbus, which makes him a true product of the Renaissance and links him to a highly positive character, the mariner Hernan de Faro, Richard’s foster-father. Mary Shelley associates him with the “progress of civilization,” writing:

A commercial spirit had sprung up during his reign, partly arising from the progress of civilization, and partly from so large a portion of the ancient nobility having perished in the civil wars. The spirit of chivalry, which isolates man, had given place to that of trade, which unites them in body. (*PW* 306)

By guaranteeing a degree of stability, order and peace, this commercial spirit instigated by Henry is thus far from being negatively connoted, whereas the old, medieval order is explicitly presented as murderous, both in the passage quoted above and throughout the whole book.

Although Richard is a character endowed with every virtue, who upholds the standard of chivalry and insists on the purity of his ideals, the author makes it clear that he is in fact blinded by ambition and responsible for the miserable deaths of thousands of men and for the unhappiness of many others, including that of his lovely wife. He acts on impulse, with the sole chivalric purpose of defending his honour, oblivious to the misery he leaves behind him, which makes his attitude “narrow and selfish,” in Mary Shelley’s terms: “Richard would have stood erect and challenged the world to accuse him—God and his right, was his defence. His right! Oh, narrow and selfish was that sentiment that could see, in any right appertaining to one man the excuse for the misery of thousands” (*PW* 252). As the gates of the Tower of London close upon Richard a few hours before his execution, Mary Shelley’s protagonist is “left alone to solitude and night” (*PW* 394) at the very end of the last chapter. Apart from the conclusion of the novel, set several years after his death, the last word of Richard’s career is therefore “night”; the term is here of course a euphemism for death, but it is also given an ambivalent meaning. One interpretation is that Richard fades into the obscure and now completely bygone Middle Ages, while the twilight of chivalry hinted at in the first pages has now entirely given way to night with the death of this last medieval figure; for—being childless—he is indeed the last. It may be noted that here the author alters the historical records, which state that Perkin Warbeck did have children by his wife Katherine Gordon.²⁰ Mary Shelley “sterilizes” him the better to underline the vanity of his enterprise and to bring into sharp relief his rival’s success, since Henry, although he is selfish and subjects his wife to a “systematized and cold-hearted tyranny” (*PW* 52), has several children and will be succeeded to the throne by his son Henry VIII. Alternatively, this final night may be interpreted as the extinction of a light: Richard’s death plunging the world into darkness. This would be a way of reversing the stereotype of the Dark Middle Ages, by linking the Knight to light and the Renaissance therefore to night. The way in which Richard is constantly presented in the novel gives weight to the latter reading.

With his “brow [...] candid as day” and “bright blue eyes [...] lighted up with intelligence” (*PW* 76), Richard of York is a character associated with light from his very first

²⁰ See Ann Wroe, *The Perfect Prince: The Mystery of Perkin Warbeck and His Quest for the Throne of England* (New York: Random House, 2003), 269 and 298.

appearance in the book, where emphasis is placed upon the flashing eyes (*PW* 25) of this boy of twelve. He is also several times metaphorically compared to the sun, for example: “a [...] golden light dawned upon his soul, and beamed from it, lighting up creation with splendour” (*PW* 229). He spent a part of his youth in sunlit Spain, land of chivalry and of a “race of heroes” (*PW* 303), where he was knighted. This “sun of York” turns everything into “a glorious summer,” and is repeatedly presented through this royal symbol, which was also linked to his father Edward IV, known as the “Sun in Splendour.” Thanks to his generosity, bravery, nobleness and other chivalrous qualities, he is “a bright light” (*PW* 190) to his friends and even to some of his foes. By contrast to this warm “apparent sun” (*PW* 304), who fights in broad daylight, cold Henry VII is compared to a “false light” (*PW* 304) and favours “midnight assassination[s]” (*PW* 6; 227). In spite of his shortcomings, Richard is “a hero to ennoble the pages of a humble tale,” as Mary Shelley writes in her Preface (*PW* 6). Thanks to him, to his equally radiant wife Katherine Gordon, and to some of his noble knights and friends, the medieval period is no longer seen as an age of darkness, and indeed Mary Shelley insists on the spiritual light shed by all these chivalric characters and extinguished by Henry, described as the “bitter enemy” (*PW* 210) of chivalry.

Instead of listening to reason, Richard acts on his generous impulses and follows his heart, like his wife, about whom Mary Shelley writes in a footnote (*PW* 395) that “[t]he character of the Lady Katherine Gordon is a favourite of [hers].” Many critics²¹ have seen Katherine as a spokeswoman for her author, reading her apology in the conclusion to the novel for choosing to remain at Henry’s court after the death of Richard as Mary Shelley’s own response to those who blamed her for being able to live and even to love after her husband’s death. This intelligent and sensible character is said to obey “a stronger power than reason” (*PW* 363), and it is written of her motives that “[i]t was not reason; it was feeling [...] that inspired [her] ideas” (*PW* 234). Katherine herself explains in the Conclusion that, along her “reason,” her “sense of duty,” her “conscientious observance of its dictates,” she “venerate[s] also the freer impulses of our souls” (*PW* 400), those of generosity, unselfishness, and love, which are alien to selfish Henry and to his commercial spirit. Though she condemns the murderous side of chivalry, Mary Shelley praises the “high virtues and exalted deeds” which it inspires:

²¹ For example, Muriel Spark (*Mary Shelley* [London: Constable, 1988], 210–11) or Barbara Jane O’Sullivan in “Beatrice in *Valperga*: A New Cassandra” in Audrey Fisch, Anne K. Mellor and Esther H. Schor, eds., *Beyond Frankenstein: The Other Mary Shelley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153.

It is at first sight strange, that men, whose trade²² was murder, who habitually wore offensive weapons, whose chief happiness was derived from the glory they acquired by inflicting misery on others, should be among those who live in our memories as examples of what is most graceful and excellent in human nature [...] the warriors of old were famous for honour, courage, and fidelity [...] because, from some motive springing from the unselfish part of our nature, they exposed themselves to danger and to death. (*PW* 61)

The death of Richard means the end of the chivalric age and of those virtues, giving way to an age of greed and selfishness.

In her Journals, Mary Shelley laments the passing of the age of chivalry and of the values embodied by her hero, when in December 1824, she finds herself alone, “poor and unprotected in London”:²³

did there exist [...] in men’s breasts a spark of the chivalrous spirit which in our youth we are taught to believe is not utterly extinct—methinks many circumstances should awaken interest—it is not so—with masculine insensibility they are willing to wound the wounded and disdain one fallen on evil days.

Despite all the books supposed to teach the gentlemen of England how to behave chivalrously, chivalry is not a living code in Mary Shelley’s age, and men are no longer animated by the spirit that prompted Richard to defend and protect an insulted woman. As William Brewer contends,

Although the commercial spirit which replaces chivalry encourages economic and social stability, it creates a world in which the old chivalric virtues of honour, loyalty, courage, and reverence towards women are no longer valued and in which men are dedicated to the acquisition of wealth [rather than to private affections or lofty ideals].²⁴

²² William D. Brewer (“William Godwin, Chivalry, and Mary Shelley’s *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*” [*Papers on Language and Literature* 35: 2 (1999)], 187), observes that Mary Shelley here uses the word “trade,” “associated with capitalism, to describe what for [her] is chivalry’s most negative feature: its militarism. Thus even [her] critique of knight-errantry is implicitly anticapitalist.”

²³ *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844*, Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 2: 487.

²⁴ Brewer, “Chivalry”, 190.

Mary Shelley reminds us here, not of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, who rejoiced in the downfall of chivalry,²⁵ but of her mother's nemesis, Edmund Burke, who writes in a famous passage of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) that "[t]he age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, oeconomists and calculators has succeeded; & the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever," thus associating chivalry, the emblem of the Middle Ages, with a light which shines no more after the French Revolution. Mary Shelley's "extinct" echoes Burke's "extinguished" and likewise implies that the end of chivalry is followed by spiritual Dark Ages. In *PW*, Mary Shelley mourns the passing of the chivalric ideal, if not the end of chivalry itself. One may be the daughter of the Enlightenment and yet sometimes prefer a bright night of the soul to the dull light of reason.

²⁵ In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft resumes the opposition between reason and the Middle Ages: "probably the spirit of romance and chivalry is on the wane; and reason will gain by its extinction." Cited in Brewer, "Chivalry," 184.